

THE STUDY OF MAN

THE COLONIAL SYSTEM OF THE U.S.S.R.

Soviet Communism and the Backward Peoples

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IT IS a commonplace that the Hapsburg Empire fell because its rulers could not satisfy the conflicting claims of its nationalities. It is less widely known that the Soviet Union is a multi-national state. Of its 200 million inhabitants nearly half are not Russians. According to Communist propaganda their mutual relations are a happy friendship and brotherhood, such as cannot even be imagined where Western landowners, capitalists, and imperialists hold sway. The miracle can be achieved only in "the land of socialism," where all alike bask in the sunshine diffused by the scientific healer of nationalist passions, the teacher of genius of all progressive humanity.

So profound is Western ignorance of the

PERHAPS no theme of Communist propaganda, as HUGH SETON-WATSON here points out, has withstood so well the disillusionment of Communist practice as the claim that in Soviet Russia a great number of national groups are encouraged to pursue an independent cultural life. On the basis of recent research into Soviet nationalities policy, Professor Seton-Watson, Professor of Russian History in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies of the University of London, here points out how far this claim has diverged from Soviet reality, and reveals the true shape and motivations of Soviet nationalism and colonialism as they absorb and dominate subject peoples both at home and abroad. Professor Seton-Watson was born in 1916 and educated at Winchester and Oxford. He is the author of *Eastern Europe Between the Wars* (1945), *The East European Revolution* (1950), and *The Decline of Imperial Russia* (1952); and most recently of a series of notable articles in *The Twentieth Century* assessing Central and Eastern European perspectives in the cold war.

Soviet nationalities, so great the desire of Western people to find some good in the Soviet system, that this propaganda picture has long passed for reality in the West. Only recently have independent Western writers begun to study this subject. In Professor Edward Hallett Carr's *A History of Soviet Russia, 1917-1923* (which is Vol. 1 of his *Bolshevik Revolution*, published by Macmillan), there is a valuable summary of Soviet doctrine on national problems. Several studies have appeared by American and British scholars on particular national problems at particular periods. Periodicals and pamphlets published by exiles from the Soviet Union contain material on recent history. (For example, *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920*, by John S. Reshetar, put out by Princeton University Press. Of the various periodicals issued by exiles of the Soviet nationalities I have found the most useful factual material in *Türkeli*, which is published in Munich.) The most serious attempt at a general survey is the recent book by Walter Kolarz, *Russia and Her Colonies*, published by Frederick A. Praeger (New York, 334 pp., \$6.00).

For those who wish to understand Soviet nationality policy, and its bearing on both Soviet foreign policy and the action of Communist parties in Asia, Mr. Kolarz is a learned, level-headed, and reliable guide on a subject of great practical importance for both statesmen and public opinion in the West. Here only a few main features of the problem can be noted.

MOSCOW's treatment of the non-Russian nationalities varied, during the successive phases of the Soviet regime, in much the same way as its treatment of its subjects as a whole. In the first months of the Bolshevik dictator-

ship the nationalities, like the workers and the peasants, were offered a paradise of freedom and happiness. During the civil war, non-Russian political groups were alternately supported as popular movements, or persecuted as bourgeois reactionaries, according to the needs of the military situation. In the years of NEP a measure of self-government was allowed to the nationalities, within the framework of the over-all Bolshevik dictatorship. At this time official doctrine abhorred equally the two "deviations" of "Great Russian chauvinism" and "local bourgeois nationalism," but in practice the central government denounced the first more severely than the second. This official emphasis was, however, differently obeyed or disregarded in different areas. In the Ukraine it was carried out: the Bolshevik rulers of the Ukrainian SSR were to some extent Ukrainian home rulers as well as Bolsheviks. In Central Asia it was ignored: the exponents of Communism in Turkestan were almost all Russians, and "Soviet power" meant power of Russian bureaucrats over Turkish or Iranian peasants.

THE first Five Year Plan brought a fierce onslaught on self-government in all non-Russian areas. The chief sufferer was the Ukraine. The first purge of Ukrainian "bourgeois nationalists" occurred in 1930. Three years later, when the death from starvation of several million Ukrainian peasants, caused by Moscow's policy of forcible collectivization and requisitions, inflamed Ukrainian nationalist feeling against Moscow, a bigger purge swept away many leading Ukrainian Communists. The most eminent, the Commissar for Education, Skrypnyk, anticipated arrest by suicide. In Central Asia, collectivization caused mass famine among the nomad herdsmen: a comparison of the census figures of 1926 and 1939 shows that about 1,500,000 Kazaks, some 40 per cent of the whole Kazak nation, "disappeared" during this period. Of the comparatively small number of Central Asians who occupied leading positions in the Communist parties many were removed by the drive against "bourgeois nationalism" in the early 1930's. At the 17th Congress of the All-Union Communist party in 1934, Stalin himself laid down that local nationalism was in many areas a more dangerous "deviation" than Great Russian chauvinism. This change of emphasis has remained valid to the present time.

The monster purge of 1937-38—the Yez-

hovshchina—involved a massacre of the leading Communists of the nationalities. In the Ukraine, Postyshev, the organizer of the 1933 purge, himself succumbed, together with all nine members of the Ukrainian Politburo, all 12 members of the Ukrainian Council of Commissars, and 45 out of 57 members of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist party. In the Transcaucasian SSR's and the North Caucasian ASSR's about 4 per cent of the population were arrested, and all leading Communists disappeared except Stalin's two faithful henchmen, the Georgian Beria and the Azerbaijani Bagirov, who have survived to the present day. In Central Asia, too, a clean sweep was made. The Uzbek Communist leaders, Hodzhaev and Ikramov, figured in the show trial of Bukharin in 1938: the Communist leaders of the other Central Asian SSR's disappeared without publicity. A further stage was reached during the Second World War. The Volga Germans, some 400,000 strong, were deported from their homes already in 1941. Later on the principle was established that if the authorities considered that a large number of members of any national group had helped the German invaders, or even had showed insufficient enthusiasm for the Soviet war effort, then the whole nation should be deported from its homeland to an unknown destination in the interior of the Soviet Union. This fate overtook the Tatars of the Crimea, the Kalmucks of the Caspian steppes, and the Karachai, Chechen, and Ingush peoples of the North Caucasus.

The manner of the deportation of the Chechen nation recalls the infamous Massacre of Glencoe of 1691, usually regarded as one of the blackest episodes in British history. Like the Campbell troops in Glencoe, the Russian MVD troops came to the Chechen mountain villages as friends, and were received as friends in Chechen houses. After they had been there some weeks came Red Army Day, February 23, 1944. The troops celebrated the occasion by songs and dances in the village squares. The villagers assembled to watch them. In the middle of the festivities orders were suddenly given to arrest all male civilians. On the following days, large numbers of the men were shot, and the rest, together with their women and children, were herded into lorries and transported to the railway. There they were packed into trucks and slowly removed, in the Russian winter, to their distant destinations.

Accounts of refugees, who had seen Chechen deportees in Central Asia at a later date, suggest that about half died of hunger, exposure, and disease during the journey. The scattered survivors have no schools or press in their own language. More than half a million Chechens have been destroyed as a nation.

THE triple centralization of the political bureaucracy, the economic planning hierarchy, and the Communist party, reinforced by the purges of the 1930's and the postwar repression, have destroyed any vestige of national self-government that existed in the 1920's. This is true of the whole of the Soviet Union. The worst effects are felt, however, in the more backward areas, such as Central Asia. As even less is known in the West about these areas than about the Ukraine or the Baltic Republics, it may be well here to devote a little space to them.

Since 1929, industrialization has made gigantic strides in Asiatic Russia. But its benefits to the local nationalities are doubtful. The growth of such industrial centers as Ufa, Karaganda, and Tashkent has provided Bashkirs, Kazaks, and Uzbeks with jobs as unskilled laborers: the skilled workers and the engineers are Russian, and to a lesser extent Ukrainians, Armenians, or Georgians, imported from outside. During the first Five Year Plan thousands of uprooted Kazaks and Bashkir nomads were forced to work in the new industrial plants in the Urals. Appalling living conditions, unfamiliar climate, and moral bewilderment caused by the sudden destruction of their traditional way of life all contributed to their very high death rate.

Since 1929 the agricultural production of Central Asia has been reorganized in the interest of Moscow. The Moscow planners have needed cotton, and Central Asia is the most suitable part of the Soviet Union to produce it. Therefore the Central Asian peasants, forced into collective farms at great cost in human lives, and still greater cost in livestock, were ordered by Moscow to grow cotton. Food grains were to be imported from European Russia or Siberia. Thereby the weapon of hunger was placed in Moscow's hands to bend the people of Turkestan to its will. The British have often been criticized for encouraging cotton production at the expense of grain in Egypt. But at least the Egyptian cotton-grower has had a better price than he would have had for grain,

and no British government ever considered withholding grain from Egypt in order to starve Egypt into submission. Egyptian politicians were able to denounce British imperialism in general, and cotton policy in particular. But Uzbek politicians who resisted Moscow's agricultural plans for Uzbekistan were "unmasked as bourgeois nationalists" and paid the supreme penalty.

Both industrial development and agricultural changes have brought an influx of Russians into Central Asia, as industrial experts and as farmers. Between 1926 and 1939, the proportion of Kirghiz in the Kirghiz Republic fell from about 67 per cent to 50 per cent. In 1938, less than a quarter of the students at the university of Kazakstan, in Alma Ata, were Kazaks. Undoubtedly many new schools, high schools, and universities have been created in Central Asia since the revolution, but they are designed principally for the Russian colonists. The great majority of industrial specialists and political administrators in Central Asia are Russians. The members of the Councils of Ministers of the SSR's are usually Asians, with the significant exceptions of the Ministers of State Security. But the heads of departments within the ministries are usually Russians. The First Secretaries of the Communist party at the republican and provincial level are usually Asians, but the Second Secretaries, and in most cases also the party secretaries in charge of propaganda, are Russians. The real business of government and party is done by these Russians, who communicate directly with their superiors in Moscow, by-passing their nominal Asian chiefs.

Soviet policy has been based from an early stage on the old principle of "divide and rule." In this it shows itself the heir to imperial Russian policy. Already at the turn of this century, the Volga Tatars, socially and culturally the most advanced of the Russian Moslems, were gaining influence among their co-religionists. Tatars provided a large part of the intelligentsia of Moslem Russia, and used their influence to strengthen the notion of the unity of all Russian Moslems, and especially of those who spoke Turco-Tatar languages. The imperial authorities resisted them, not only by repressive measures, but also by doing all they could to stress differences of dialect or of social customs between individual Moslem groups. The Soviet regime has developed this practice more "scientifically." Dialects are mag-

nified into languages, tribes and nations, Tatars and Bashkirs are treated as two nations. In the 1920's the Khanates of Bokhara and Khiva were abolished, and together with the previous Russian administrative units of Turkistan were reshaped into five Republics—Turkmen, Uzbek, Kazak, Kirghiz, and Tajik—which in due course became fully fledged SSR's. Since then these "nations" have been kept as separate from each other as possible. All are encouraged to have close contact with Moscow, but little if any with each other. The Soviet government's motive was not solicitude for the ethnical purity of the Central Asian "nations," but simply the desire to divide in order the better to dominate.

It is doubtful how successful the Soviet rulers have been in their attempt to denationalize the peoples of the Union, to reduce them to a common denominator of *homo sovieticus*. One effect of industrialization has been to create a more numerous Asian intelligentsia. Though education in Asiatic Russia serves principally the local Russians, Asians too make use of it. Though the proportion of educated persons among the Asians is much lower than among the Russians, it is much higher than it was among the Asians before 1929. Moscow hopes that these educated Asians will be won over by the regime which has given them their opportunity, that they will become the exponents of Moscow's policy among their own people. It is probable that those Asians who enter the upper caste of Soviet society are treated as equals by their Russian fellow-members of the caste. There is no color bar in Soviet Russia, and there was none even in imperial Russia.

But the problem is not so simple as that. In pre-1914 Hungary, Slovaks or Serbs or Rumanians who rose through the Hungarian education system were able to pursue careers without suffering discrimination, provided that they regarded themselves not as Slovaks or Serbs or Rumanians, but as Hungarians. Yet as education became more widespread, the number of educated Slovaks and Serbs and Rumanians who insisted on retaining their original nationality, and devoting their talents and skill to the service of their own nation in its struggle against political domination by the Hungarians, steadily grew. In France there is no color bar against colonials who have attained higher education. Yet the French-educated intellectuals of Vietnam, Tunis, Madagascar, or

the Ivory Coast have tended increasingly to act not as exponents of French policy among their own people, but as champions of their own peoples' national movements against the French.

It is difficult to believe that the same is not the case with the Asian intellectuals in the Soviet Union. They cannot be unaware of the appalling sufferings of their own peoples. That they should be indifferent to these sufferings would be a contradiction of the experience of all colonial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries. Such facts as are available from Soviet Asia give the opposite impression. There is evidence that, despite persecution and propaganda, Islam still has a strong hold not only over the peasants but also over the intelligentsia. The constant purges of the leading Communists of the SSR's are evidence of persistent nationalism among the Soviet-created ruling class of the nationalities. The purges have continued even in the period of relative post-war stability. The Kazak SSR received a new Prime Minister at the end of 1951, the Uzbek Communist party a new First Secretary in 1950. Both the government and the party leadership of the Georgian SSR were drastically purged in 1952. Even more revealing is the purge of literature and history in all the Moslem SSR's in the last years. The official history of Kazakstan, published in 1943, was rejected by the authorities as suffering from bourgeois nationalist errors. The revised version appeared in two volumes in 1949 and 1950. Early in 1951 the Kazak party authorities decided that this, too, was unacceptable. The purge of history and literature has been extended during 1951 and 1952 to the North Caucasus and to the Azerbaijan, Turkmen, Uzbek, and Kirghiz SSR's. The past anti-Russian rebellions and wars of these nations, previously praised by Communist writers as anti-imperialist, are now interpreted as reactionary revolts, instigated by Turkish or British agents, against the progressive influence of Russian civilization. Moscow's determination to deprive the Moslem peoples even of their dead heroes shows its fear of the national consciousness of the new Moslem intelligentsia. Moscow, in fact, faces an unpleasant dilemma. In order to develop the economic resources of the Caucasus and Central Asia it needs educated people from these nations. But every Asian intellectual it produces is a potential leader of nationalist resistance to Moscow.

THE peoples of Soviet Asia suffer from a threefold tyranny. Their workers are exploited in the same way as the European proletariat in the worst days of early capitalism; their peasants have exchanged serfdom to the nobility for serfdom to the state. All classes alike are subject to totalitarian terror. All nations alike are subject to an alien central government in Moscow. This combination of economic, political, and national oppression has no parallel in the history of European colonialism. Yet the spokesmen of this regime present themselves at meetings of the UN as champions of "national liberation" against "Western imperialism," and are accepted as such by large sections of Moslem, Far Eastern, and African opinion. It is time that the truth about Soviet colonialism were more widely known.

It is, however, important that Western opinion should not make the mistake of attributing these or other misdeeds of the Moscow rulers to "Russian imperialism." The Russian people never chose the Bolshevik regime. Russian

workers and peasants are exploited by the same state capitalist bosses as Uzbek or Azerbaijani workers and peasants. Russian intellectuals are at the mercy of the same party inquisitors as Kazak or Georgian intellectuals. Even the Russian colonists living on the land seized from Kazak nomads who perished in the famine created from Moscow have no security. The non-Russian peoples may or may not one day have the chance to decide their own fate, and they then may or may not decide to separate from Russia and set up their own independent states. But it is not for the West to incite them against the Russians or to blame the wickedness of the Russian people for their fate. Mr. Kolarz, in his restrained and fair-minded conclusion, rightly stresses that only when Stalinist totalitarianism is a thing of the past, will the Russian people be able to enjoy the cultural intercourse and friendship both with their Asian neighbors and with the Western world, for which its genius, warped and frustrated by Bolshevik tyranny, truly fits it.